

Remarks in a Meeting With Parents, Students, and Educators on Efforts To Reopen Schools and an Exchange With Reporters

August 12, 2020

The President. Well, thank you very much. And we're here to talk about a very important subject—education—but also opening our schools. And we have some of our great teachers and parents and a very representative group, and we also have some extraordinary experts with us. I'd like to maybe start off by asking our Vice President to say a few words. And then, if you would, Betsy and Kellyanne. And we'll go around and talk to some of the parents and teachers. And thank you all for being here very much. Appreciate it.

Please.

Vice President Michael R. Pence. Well, thank you, Mr. President. And I want to thank all of the educators and leaders who are here and a part of a conversation.

[At this point, Vice President Pence continued his remarks, concluding as follows.]

And so, Mr. President, I want to thank you for your leadership. It's great to be here with the Secretary of Education, with Kellyanne, and all these remarkable teachers in particular. As you know, I've been married to a schoolteacher for 35 years. She's preparing to go back to the classroom this fall. And I want to thank all the educators who are here for all the hard work you've done through these difficult days and all the work that you're doing to get our kids back to school.

Thank you, Mr. President.

The President. Thank you.

Secretary of Education Elisabeth Prince DeVos. Well, Mr. President, thank you so much for your continued, bold leadership through this crisis, and particularly with respect to getting kids back to school. It's been a privilege to travel with the Vice President to meet with educators, education leaders, and especially with parents and students to hear about what their needs are as fall quickly approaches. And so I'm just thankful to be here with this group today to listen and learn from you about what your needs are as we anticipate getting back to school.

And, Commissioner Corcoran, thank you for your bold leadership in Florida, really setting high expectations for all of the students and educators there.

We know that, for students and their families, they can't be held captive to other people's fears or agendas. We have got to ensure that families and parents have options that are going to work for their child and for their children's education.

And so I look forward to this conversation to—as to how we can ensure that we do not have a one-size-fits-all approach, but that we do ensure every child has a chance to go on learning full-time this fall.

Senior Counselor to the President Kellyanne E. Conway. Thank you very much, Mr. President, Mr. Vice President, Secretary DeVos. We're here mainly to hear from each of you today. Before I do that, I just wanted to point out that there's a fairly recent Kaiser Family Foundation health tracker poll that shows over 65 percent of America's parents are very concerned that their children will fall behind academically and socially if they don't get back to school.

[*Senior Counselor Conway continued her remarks, concluding as follows.*]

So, in the interest of opening soon and safely for this entire country, Mr. President, we'd like to start with Elisa from Waukesha, Wisconsin. She's a single mother and a small-business owner. And her son Luis is entering a public district school in—a public district school—the ninth grade, I believe. Freshman year for Luis.

Waukesha, WI, resident Elisa Macia. Correct.

Senior Counselor Conway. If you can tell us a couple of things, Elisa. First of all, what were the relative advantage or disadvantage of him being a bilingual student when you had to go virtual learning?

And then, we understand that your school district has not yet announced a reopening plan, and we're in pretty much mid-August. So can you address both of those for us?

Ms. Macia. Correct. Yes, we as the parents, we had to take a survey regarding either going back to school or going virtual. So, at the moment, we—like you had mentioned, we do not have an answer yet. Hopefully, we do. And I'm hoping that we do go back because all the details that you just mentioned are very critical and important. And I am a hundred percent of what you guys are saying at the moment.

It was kind of difficult for him, because it's really hard being bilingual and having to learn two different languages. And—but with the help of teachers and the community, he stood up and did a great job. That was the advantage that, when he needed help, teachers were there to help him and, you know, fulfilled whatever gap, you know, was not being covered. And so he did pretty well after that.

The President. But you like going back immediately, right?

Ms. Macia. Oh, yes, a hundred percent. A hundred percent.

The President. A lot of people agree. A lot of people agree with you.

Ms. Macia. Yes.

The President. Thank you.

Ms. Macia. You're welcome.

The President. Very good job. That's great.

Senior Counselor Conway. Dr. Paul Peterson is the director of the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University and Hoover Institution senior fellow.

Dr. Peterson, we've heard an awful lot, including from the President and the Vice President, CDC Director, and others, about the relative problems that children could face if they are in indefinite lockdown.

Would you please expand on that, as a doctor?

Harvard University Henry Lee Shattuck Professor of Government and Director of the Program on Education Policy and Governance Paul E. Peterson. Well, we know that if—for every year that you spend in school, in the future, you will earn 10-percent more in lifetime earnings. So, if we locked down schools for a year, we assign this generation of students to a 10-percent earning loss in the rest of their life.

I mean, this is profound: that the costs are vastly greater than people have appreciated. To say nothing about the importance of young people being together with one another, the most important element in social growth is being with your peers, with your own friends and

neighbors, and not being isolated in a setting where you don't have social relationships. To say nothing of the medical costs of being isolated and not—you know, I remember when I was a child I had the teacher said: "You know, he can't see. He needs glasses." Well, I've got some new eyes now, so I can see, but, yes, you are told in school what the problems are, and then you can get those problems solved. All those things are out the door if you're not in school.

The President. So sitting in isolation with a computer, looking at a laptop, is not the same as being out there in the real world?

Mr. Peterson. You know, at one time, Mr. President, I thought digital learning was the future, but we have learned, through this COVID crisis, that we haven't got digital learning to the point where you can really engage young people. They've got to be in that classroom. They have to be with their peers.

The President. So if you're a Presidential candidate and you're sitting in a basement and you're looking at a computer, that's not a good thing? *[Laughter]* Sounds like it would be the same.

Mr. Peterson. *[Laughter]* Well, I——

The President. I won't put you on the spot. I'm not going to put you on——

Mr. Peterson. I can't comment on that. *[Laughter]*

The President. Thank you very much. A lot of truth to that.

Senior Counselor Conway. Hypothetically speaking, yes. *[Laughter]*

I don't know a single parent who thinks their kid needs more screen time, to your point, Dr. Peterson. *[Laughter]*

Lynne Gronseth, from Arkansas, you've been a special education teacher. I think you're entering your 19th year. But you also are considered higher risk for contracting——

Springdale High School teacher Lynne Gronseth. Yes.

Senior Counselor Conway. ——the coronavirus since you have asthma. Is that correct?

Ms. Gronseth. I am. Yes.

Senior Counselor Conway. Tell us how you feel about going back to school with the students?

Ms. Gronseth. My son is a physician and, I will say, radiologist at Stanford. And so every time there were rumors and myths, I just called him and said, "What are you hearing there?" And he never once—not once said, "Please don't go back." He want—he knows how much I love my special education students, how much they need those special resources—like your speech—my other colleagues provide. The instruction was extremely difficult for my students. A lot wouldn't come to the Zoom meetings. It's just so different.

But what I was going to say is I typed the protocols from Springdale Public Schools, and I'm very comfortable with them. They've gone beyond the call of duty. I gave that to my allergist, emailed it to my son, and both of them gave me, with precautions, the ability to go back.

And I want to be there for my students and help them navigate through this and make them comfortable to come back safely.

The President. That's great. Thank you very much.

Ms. Gronseth. Thank you.

The President. Thank you very much.

Senior Counselor Conway. Sir, thank you. Dr. Melanie McGraw Piasecki, from Charlotte, North Carolina, a neonatologist, but also a mom of three, who I think has been home with the kids——

Charlotte, NC, resident Melanie McGraw Piasecki. That's right.

Senior Counselor Conway. ——helping them navigate the online world of learning. Could you tell us—both a mom of three who has been home with them, but also through your medical experience—how can we learn to safely and quickly return to school?

Dr. Piasecki. Sure. My children, I would say, did not have a great experience in the spring, particularly my youngest, who was in first grade at the time. I think the online learning for the young ones, it just doesn't work.

And my school—it's a private independent school—recognized that. And when they go back next week, they're sending the little ones back every day, which I think is great. The middle and upper school ones will be back in a hybrid way every other day. And they've incorporated some choice too. So if parents are not comfortable, they're able to do a full online experience. But we're definitely going back as much as they'll let us.

In terms of being a pediatrician, I just think the science is so clear that the risk of death or hospitalization for children with this virus is so, so low, but we know the risks of missing school are catastrophic. We probably don't even know how high they are yet, and they cover so many different areas.

So I feel like—Mr. President, thank you for your leadership on trying to get students back in school safely. So appreciate it.

The President. And the concept of every other day seems a little ridiculous, right? If you're going to do it, you do it. If you're not going to do it—the concept of going back, even from a management standpoint from the school, every other day seems very strange.

Dr. Piasecki. I think the idea is, they're going to take half the student body on "A" days and half the student body on "B" days.

The President. I see.

Dr. Piasecki. And so they can socially distance in the facility doing it that way. And then, if you're home, you'll be watching it on technology.

The President. Okay, but you'd rather see them go back, period. Right?

Dr. Piasecki. I would.

The President. You'd rather not see that at all.

Dr. Piasecki. That's right. That's right.

The President. Okay. Great job. Thank you very much.

Dr. Piasecki. Of course.

Senior Counselor Conway. Nilsa Alvarez. Hi. It sounds like your children are back in school, following a decision that you and other parents in Seymour, Tennessee, had to make with respect to whether to keep them at home and learn virtually or go back to school. You chose to go back to school. Why? And how is it going so far?

Seymour, TN, resident Nilsa Alvarez. Well, the "why" is very easy. I'm a Hispanic small-business owner, so I need my kids in school to run the business. And I know a lot of families—it's a struggle if you're working your business and being a teacher at the same time. It's just not easy.

But we've made that decision, and I really want to thank the leadership of Governor Bill Lee, who emphasized to the school districts to offer the options of in-person learning and virtual so that parents would have the freedom to choose which education route would be best for their child.

The parents in my area and at our school decided to send our kids back. Our kids are excited. There is social distancing. There's a lot of protocols in place. Their temperatures are taken every morning. Everything is going very smooth.

But what is really good is that my son and daughter, they understand the seriousness of the virus for those at risk. So they're keeping an eye out for those who are at risk so we can look after them. We have a group chat with the parents, and we're communicating all the time if there's any symptom so that we know to—you know, if something's happening or not, whether we send our kids back to school that day or not. And because the virtual class is happening at the same time, our kids will never fall behind.

The President. So that's great. Thank you very much. Well said.

Senior Counselor Conway. Claudia Valladares, you are a kindergarten teacher at a public school, and we understand you had a very successful in-person summer school experience, which may be very surprising to some people here that that actually was happening this summer. Can you tell us that—from Lubbock, Texas? And also, how does that portend for a successful in-person fall?

Ramirez Elementary School teacher Claudia Valladares. Yes, I'm from Lubbock, Texas, and I teach at Ramirez Elementary. And we did have a really successful summer school. There were no outbreaks. It was in-person. There were precautions: with social distancing, 6 feet apart; and children had to wear masks, 10 and older. There was temperatures taken for the staff and the students.

And this year, our parents had the choice whether to do virtual or in-person. And so far, we have 70 percent wanting to be in class. And so we're ready to go, and we start Monday.

The President. Very exciting. Right?

Ms. Valladares. Thank you. Thank you for all of your leadership with this.

The President. Thank you very much. Say hello to everybody.

Ms. Valladares. Okay.

The President. I know the area well. It's great.

Ms. Valladares. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. President.

Senior Counselor Conway. Mr. President, you heard from a couple of our last speakers something that you actually have made happen in signing the CARES Act. There's about \$13 billion worth of funding. And I was briefed by an HHS official this morning who said only 4 percent has been tapped into. They can use that to help them with the temperature checks, with the testing, however they wish to use it.

So we would really implore those States and those local school districts to take advantage of the money that you and the Vice President, the Secretary, and others have already secured in a bipartisan fashion.

The President. And what I'd like to do is, I'd like to see the money follow the student. If a school is going to be closed, and we're giving all of this money on the Federal basis to a school, and if a student is going to go to a different school—really, at the choice more of the parent, in all fairness, than the student; you know, where you want to go and what school you want to bring the student to—I think the money should follow the student. And that's something that we want to do.

We're having a hard time with the Democrats. They want the money to follow the union, to be honest. It's very simple: "Give it to the union." But the fact is—"Give it to dues." Because the union people are fantastic people in there, but the people that run the union, it's disgraceful, and the dues that they charge the teachers. And that's what it's all about.

So I would like—anyway, I would like the money to follow the student. And this way, you can make your own choice if the school is closed.

You know, why are we paying if a school is closed? Why are we paying the school? I'd rather give it to the student, the parents, and you do your own thing. And, to me, it makes a lot of sense.

Senior Counselor Conway. Secretary DeVos.

Secretary DeVos. Well, and I would just add to that: Senator Tim Scott has a bill introduced in Congress that would do just that. It would empower parents to make the choice for their children to find the right setting and the right fit for them, depending on their circumstances. And with the President's bold leadership here, I think we can get it done. Congress can do the right thing on behalf of parents and their kids.

The President. So, Mike, we'll let him know we're in favor of that. Tim Scott is fantastic, and the bill is really good. So why don't we do that, okay?

Vice President Pence. Oh, we will, Mr. President. I assure you.

Senior Counselor Conway. Excellent. You've always been the school choice President, the school choice candidate. I know, as Governor of Indiana, Vice President Pence expanded charter schools and other educational freedom opportunities. And I will say that, we, as a nation, can philosophically and politically differ on many issues, but I've never, ever heard a very compelling and persuasive, memorable reason why people oppose the kind of school choice that the two of you are fighting for.

And school choice means parent choice. So our last set of questions really go to the parents and the importance of parents' ability to choose the right education for their children, particularly within this dual medical and financial pandemic.

Mr. President, we have with us today—and I want to read it, so I get it all right—Janie Neeley of Columbia, South Carolina. She's a former public school teacher herself. She's a reading specialist. Her zoned school district plans to provide full-time virtual instruction. She believes her high schooler will be fine, but her kindergarten has Down syndrome and must receive in-person instruction.

Janie's husband Chris is here, and he serves as the Chairman of the President's Committee for People With Intellectual Disabilities. Thank you very much for being here, Chris. And God bless both of you and your children.

Would you like to tell us a little bit, Janie, about how you're approaching the school year?

Columbia, SC, resident Janie Neeley. Absolutely. When schools closed in the spring abruptly, it was especially difficult for families with children that have special needs because, for us, it was like falling off an early intervention cliff. Schools not only provide the academics for students with special needs, but it also provides the much-needed therapies and services to

address developmental delays. And the structure and routine of a school day is so critical for this population of students. It simply cannot be replicated in a virtual platform, and especially for a kindergartner with Down syndrome.

Unfortunately, our school district has adopted a virtual-only reopening plan. And it's been extremely disappointing because, as a parent, I wish—well, I need and I wish that I had been given a choice. Because I know for a fact that this style of learning will cause my son to regress and to fall behind. And we were working so hard for him to be fully included with his peers.

So my hope is that we can all work together to get in-person learning, especially, open for the students that are most vulnerable, and to have that choice for parents. Because I know my son best, and I know what he needs.

The President. That's really well said. So it's been a burden—a tremendous burden—and what you've been through has been a great burden, obviously. How do they change that? How do they change it? What would you recommend?

Ms. Neeley. I think families with children with special needs, we're already carrying a pretty tremendous burden. We are constantly incorporating different therapies and things of that nature. What's nice about it being incorporated in the school is that it happens during the school day.

Unfortunately, in my situation, we've now been forced to change and to find another school option for our son. We're fortunate, because a lot of families don't have that option because smaller schools, private schools, parochial schools may not have the staff and the structure to accept children with special needs. So there's not always that option.

We're fortunate in that situation, but now my family has taken on the burden of not budgeting and planning for tuition. So having the dollars follow the student is very critical for a family like ours. And now I'm also having to plan all of his therapies on the outside. So we're talking about a kindergartner that's going to school from 8 in the morning until 2, 2:30 in the afternoon, and then he has to have occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech therapy all after school. That's a long day.

The President. That's a lot of work.

Ms. Neeley. It is. Thank you.

The President. Fantastic job. Thank you very much.

Ms. Neeley. Thank you.

The President. How did she do, Chris? Good?

Chairman of the President's Committee for People With Intellectual Disabilities Christopher G. Neeley. She did excellent, sir. Thank you.

The President. Not too bad.

Senior Counselor Conway. Is there anything you'd like to say?

Chairman Neeley. Thank you. You know, I think the conversation in America right now—that children with special needs have really been left out. And so, Mr. President, I want to thank this administration.

Mr. Vice President, when you and the Secretary came to Columbia a few weeks ago, you addressed that issue: that people with disabilities are being left out. And so what we have here are people that are on the frontlines in education that are saying, "We can open the schools for everyone." I visited two schools this week in South Carolina that have charter schools. Students are in class. Teachers are there. They're learning. They're playing with each other. I mean, it's

been a great experience. So we could do this in America. We can get America back to school and make our education system great.

The President. That's great. Thank you very much. Appreciate it.

Senior Counselor Conway. Florida's commissioner of education, Mr. Corcoran, you spearheaded an emergency declaration with Governor DeSantis basically to meet the demands of parents for in-person instruction.

I'm very struck when I read these parents surveys in many districts. Parents overwhelmingly are saying "yes" when they are asked, "Do you feel it is safe for your son or daughter to return to school?" And often, they're being big-footed by a county health commissioner or a school board.

How are you meeting that demand? And how do you know that parents are so in demand in Florida for in-person instruction? What are you hearing?

Florida Commissioner of Education Richard Corcoran. Well, we did exactly as you said; we did an emergency order that basically gave increased flexibility and increased choice to parents, teachers, and the districts. And there's certainty in the funding. But if you're not—what you were saying and what got reported it—you know, it was the same day you said "open schools," so they said we colluded. I wish I colluded with you. *[Laughter]*

The President. That sounds like a good idea.

Senior Counselor Conway. They like that word.

Commissioner Corcoran. But we opened up—you know, we said, "You have to open up, as an option, 5 days a week for schoolchildren." And now, in Florida—we're in August—our first schools are opening up this week. And throughout August, we'll have—all 67 of our districts will open up.

[Commissioner Corcoran continued his remarks, concluding as follows.]

But I completely respect and wanted to honor the decision of a parent who says, "Well, what about—I don't feel safe." I think the evidence is overwhelming. We've all seen it. But if they—you have that right. If you want to do distance learning, we're going to do the best possible way. But to the other 70, 80 percent of us, we have the right, too, to go back and have our kids get that world-class education.

The President. It is interesting, because one thing we've learned during this horror show of the China plague is that virtual is not as good as being there. Virtual is just not the same thing. And, for a long time, we've been hearing how great it would be, how great it would be. Well, we've had the ultimate sample—right?—namely the whole country, practically, and it's not as good.

We've also learned that telehealth is very good. Telehealth is up 3,500 percent. It's incredible. Can you imagine that—3,500 [percent]*—where people can stay in their homes, their apartments, wherever they are, and they can—not have to go to hospitals and doctors and everything else? That's been an incredible success. You know, who would have thought? That's become tremendous and really has been good.

But the virtual learning is not like being in a classroom, and we've learned that, I think, very strongly, in almost all cases. People thought for a long time that would be the answer, but it's—that's not the answer. The answer is an old-fashioned one, isn't it? Huh?

Thank you. Great job you're doing in Florida. Thank you very much.

* White House correction.

Commissioner Corcoran. Thank you, Mr. President.

Senior Counselor Conway. Mr. President, our final guest is a mom in Fairfax County, Lindsay Ammons. She's one of the parents who said "yes" to the question "Do you feel safe returning your children to school?" And her older daughter will have, in Fairfax County, just 4 half days of virtual instruction at her grade level and 1 day off. So Lindsay has decided to exercise her parent choice and do "pod homeschooling." Can you tell us about that, please?

Fairfax County, VA, resident Lindsay Ammons. Yes. Yes, absolutely.

That's all correct. Everything that everyone has already mentioned—we also had a very poor experience with virtual learning. The kindergarten age, I think, is very difficult, as everyone has already spoken about.

But she also, it's important to note, was an absolute lover of learning in general. She is very bright, very eager to learn, and we really watched that all fade. We watched her education deteriorate. And we also really saw her mental health suffer over the course of the spring. So we were, you know, very eager to get her back into in-person learning, and we really felt very confident and comfortable with the precautions that were put in place by our district.

Originally, we were offered 2 days in-person, 3 days virtual. And then, that's actually since changed over the last few weeks, and we are now a hundred-percent virtual. Fortunate for us, we had already kind of gone a different route and set up a homeschool situation for her with a small group of parents in our community. And you know, we're very grateful for that.

That was certainly not, you know, an easy choice to make. You know, it was an unexpected cost and something we hadn't planned for, but we felt like it was really, really important for her to be in a classroom setting.

The President. Thank you very much.

Ms. Ammons. Thank you.

The President. Very uniform, very interesting. And I think most people do feel this way, wouldn't you say so? I think most people feel this way.

We have a man with us who's a great expert from Stanford. He's working with us, he's consulting with us. And he's going to be at our press conference in a little while, at 5:30. But maybe Scott Atlas—Dr. Scott Atlas could say just a couple of words. And we're going to be covering it in more detail in a little while, and you folks are—if you're interested in watching, we'd love to have you.

Scott, please.

White House COVID-19 Pandemic Adviser Scott W. Atlas. Okay, thank you, Mr. President. It's a great honor to be asked to help out in any way I can. And the event, I thought, was terrific. I want to thank everyone for participating.

And sort of to reiterate the bottom line on this, as the President and Vice President and Secretary DeVos have said, which is: We know that the risk of the disease is extremely low for children, even less than that of seasonal flu. We know that the harms of locking out the children from school are enormous. And we also know, as we all would agree, that educating America's children is right at the top of the list for our Nation's priorities.

So I thank the President and everyone here for acknowledging these truths, and to get kids back to school safely.

Thank you.

The President. Thank you, Scott. That's very good. So we'll have more from Scott in a little while. We're going to meet together. And we've been working with him very closely, all of the Task Force, all of the White House. And we've made a lot of progress. We've made tremendous progress. You see countries—other countries are now blowing up, in terms of the disease.

You call it what you want. So many different names for the disease, whether it's "China virus" and some I won't get into, because I just get myself in trouble every time I do. But I'm angry about it. And so everybody else in this country angry about it.

So we will have a press conference in a little while. You'll be seeing the doctor. You'll be seeing a few of the people, and I'll be making a statement. And I think that'll start at about 5:30.

I want to thank everybody very much for coming in and being with you. We're on your side 100 percent. We're on your side.

We'd like to also see football get going. [*Laughter*] We want to see college football. And I don't know what they're doing with high school football, but I guess it's the same kind of a thought process. So we want to see that happen. And I think some of it will happen. To a large extent, it's going to happen.

They want to do it. I'll tell who wants to have—do it are the players and the coaches. They want to do it. I spoke with Trevor Lawrence, the great quarterback, and he's very smart. He understood it very well. He said, "Hey, I'm a lot safer on the field than I am being out there." And he got it. He got it very quickly.

Coach O, I spoke with him. He's some coach, that one. He's a great coach. And he feels his players just want to be out there. So we've spoken to a lot of different people, and they want to get out.

And our country is opening up. We're opening up very strongly, if you look at retail sales numbers, car sale numbers, used car numbers, and employment numbers. We have—we're hiring—over the last 3 months, the most people ever hired in the history of our country. So you had a lower base, but nevertheless we hired a tremendous amount—by far the biggest number of people ever hired during a 3-month period, so—for the quarter.

So I just want to thank everybody. We'll see you folks in a little while. And thank you very much. Appreciate it.

School Reopening Efforts

Q. Mr. President? Mr. President, what do you say to the families that are not—that don't feel safe with their kids going back to school?

The President. We'll—[*inaudible*]. We'll talk about it inside—a little while. Too much respect for these people to discuss anything. Okay?

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:02 p.m. in the State Dining Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Trevor Lawrence, quarterback, Clemson University football team; and Edward J. Orgeron, Jr., head coach, Louisiana State University football team. Vice President Pence referred to his wife Karen. Senior Counselor Conway referred to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Robert R. Redfield, Jr.

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